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Page 51-62

# Theorizing the Quasi-Private: The Latin American Family in Select Novels by Mario Vargas Llosa

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**Abstract:** The family has, for centuries, engaged the Latin American imagination, as a quasi-private sphere where the subject negotiates with the inner/private and outer/public realms of existence, in compliance with, and at times in discordance with the state. The rapidly changing contours of the Latin American socio-political scenario have made its presence felt in the depiction of the family in literature. The paper attempts to explore the family as a kinship unit as depicted in the works of Mario Vargas Llosa, with special reference to *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969) and *The Discreet Hero* (2013). Llosa's works are unique in their depiction of the family in that the rupture of the established unit marks the movement of the narrative in conspicuous ways. The family serves as an interface between the public and the private and serves as the link connecting the characters to the outside world-i.e., the politico-jural domain" (Goody 93). The paper would explore the family as depicted in Llosa's works as a quasi-private site of rupture existing in a complementary relationship with the state.

**Keywords:** Family, quasi-private, Latin America, kinship, disciplinary institution, cooperative conflict.

## **Introduction**

The family has, for centuries, engaged the Latin American imagination, as a quasi-private sphere where the subject negotiates with the inner/private and outer/public realms of existence, in compliance with, and at times in discordance with the state. The concept of the 'family' has undergone radical transformations in Latin America over the years. From a domestic unit comprising the father, mother and children the family has evolved to include single-mother/father units and units comprising homosexual partners. The rapidly changing contours of the Latin American socio-political

scenario have made its presence felt in the depiction of the family in literature. The paper attempts to explore the family as a kinship unit as depicted in the works of Mario Vargas Llosa, with special reference to *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969) and *The Discreet Hero* (2013). The family serves as the link connecting the characters to the outside world-i.e., the politico-jural domain” (Goody 93) - shaping them in particular ways so that they ‘fit in’ in the public sphere. The paper would explore the family as depicted in Llosa’s works as a quasi-private site of rupture which, nevertheless exists in a complementary relationship with the state, functioning as a disciplinary institution and a site of cooperative conflict.

Mario Vargas Llosa’s works trace the trajectories the characters and the nations underwent by focusing on the transformations in the families featuring in the novels. In the societies depicted in the works, the subject is imparted an identity by the politico-jural domain in accordance with his/her family background. The public domain negotiates with the private realm of the family to construct the individual’s identity. In *TDH*, the anti-social activities of Miguel, Miki and Escobita are perceived as the result of their bourgeois background. In *CC*, Santiago’s identity as a member of the Zavala family becomes a burden for him, preventing him from entering the politico-jural domain as an autonomous subject free to choose his political affiliations.

## **The Family as Quasi-Private and the Shaping of ‘Familial’ Identities**

In the Latin American social order depicted in the works, marriage becomes a way of reinforcing class and racial identities of the families involved. Since, as Hegel says, “the family as person has its real external existence in property” (168), marriage becomes a way of preserving and building on property and the associated social status in the public domain.

In *CC*, Popeye, Tete's boyfriend, belongs to the bourgeoisie family of the Arevalos. Like Tete's father Fermin Zavala, Popeye's father is a part of Odria's government and hence the relationship between them is permitted and in fact, encouraged. Their marriage is a cause of celebration, unlike that of Santiago and Ana. Since Ana belongs to a lower class family, Senora Zoila is unable to accept her as her daughter-in-law. She says: ". . . how can I see my son married to someone who could be his servant. . . She wheedled you, she turned your head, and that little social climber hasn't done anything to me?" (Llosa 542-43). In *TDH*, Miki and Escobita believe that Armida, the domestic servant, 'seduced' their father in order to inherit his wealth. They refuse to accept her as their stepmother because of her low social status.

Racial identity is also important in postcolonial societies while building marital alliances. Peru was a multiracial country inhabited by Whites, Indians, Blacks, Mulattoes and Mestizos among others. The mixing of races through marriage was looked down upon. Hence, in *CC*, the alliance between Don Cayo, the son of a wealthy White and Rosa, the daughter of a milk-woman of Indian origin, causes his father to oust him from the house. Similarly, in *TDH*, Ismael's marriage to Armida is frowned upon because the latter is a *chola*<sup>1</sup>. His sons are ashamed of the fact that their father married an "ignorant, lousy half-breed, a *chola*", making them "the laughingstock of all the decent families in Lima" (Llosa 113). In these instances, we see the prejudices that mark the public sphere making their presence felt in and through the private realm of the family.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Latin American context, the term 'cholo' refers to people with indigenous origins. Most of them are of mixed blood and are considered to be an inferior race. The word 'cholo' is thus also used as a derogatory term for immigrants and mestizos.

The basic unit of kinship, the elementary family, comprising the primary, secondary and tertiary sets of relationships, as A R Radcliffe Brown argues, feature in the works under consideration. One of the features that mark these families is the intergenerational conflict. The ideologies as well as the lifestyle of the younger generation of Peruvians as depicted in the works are totally different from those of the older generations. While the latter were often pro-colonial, the younger generation was opposed to colonial rule as well as dictatorships. The shift that occurred in the erstwhile colonies after decolonization shaped the mindset of the new generation while the old remained within the confines of the previous systems. As such, the ideologies of the younger members of the family often clash with those of the older members, leading to ruptures in the domestic fabric. This is best exemplified by the conflicts that shatter the Zavala family due to Santiago's Communist affiliations and vocal opposition of Odria. Non-normative and unsanctioned relationships, when discovered, also cause ruptures in the family. Fermin Zavala's homosexual relationship with Ambrosio distances his wife and son from him. The family remains unified only because of concerns about their status, and normativity within the domestic cell becomes a façade. Similarly, Miki and Escobita in *THD* cannot accept their father's marriage to a *chola*, which in turn leads to ruptures in the fabric of the family.

## Reading Biopower in the Quasi-Private

There are several instances in the novel where the family serves to enforce discipline. Fermin and Zoila ensure that their children are well-behaved, by imposing punishments for transgressing boundaries and by rewarding them for their achievements. We observe the family functioning as a disciplinary institution, enforcing governmentality, through the exercise of biopower, as Foucault argues.

Llosa's novels feature step-parenthood as a dominant motif. This is especially evident in *TDH*, which is set in modern-day Peru, where remarriages have become very common with the relaxation of the norms laid down by the Catholic Church. However, these marriages are acceptable only if they conform to societal norms. Rigoberto's marriage to Lucrecia is acceptable since both of them are young and belong to the same class. However, Isamel's marriage with Armida causes a scandal and the society frowns upon it. The existing conventions in the public sphere prohibited their alliance and Ismael is no longer considered a 'respectable' man. This, combined with the fear that they would be disinherited, makes Ismael's adult sons hate their stepmother. On the other hand, Rigoberto's son, Fonchito, is very close to his stepmother, since she came to the family when he was a child. Her arrival does not cause a rupture in his relationship with his father and this makes her acceptable to Fonchito. There is a sharp contrast between Fonchito's and the twins' relationships with their stepmothers. The difference in the socio-political and cultural conditions in which they were raised accounts for this. The liberal systems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century allow Fonchito to accept non-normative domesticity, while the traditional values of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century cause Miki and Escobita to harbor resentment towards their stepmother. Here, we see an instance of the public domain regulating relationships within the domestic.

Similarly, in *TDH*, Felicito construes of Miguel's easy-going nature and stylishness as symptoms of degeneration. "He was an awful student, he only liked to have fun, kick around soccer balls, drink in the chicha bars" (Llosa 229). Felicito refuses to accommodate his son's lifestyle and sends him to the army so that he would not turn into a 'wastrel'. The state machinery is utilized by the head of the family as a means of enforcing discipline and producing 'normative' entities conforming to state ideology.

The family, aided by disciplinary institutions, works as an instrument of the state, policing for it and ensuring the continuity of “governmentality” (Burchell et al 87). In turn, the state, by censuring non-normative subjects, assist the family in maintaining discipline within the private realm. An instance of the state’s influence in socializing children is seen in the case of Fonchito in *TDH*. He is educated at Markham Academy, one of the most prestigious private schools in Peru where a combination of British and Peruvian education was provided. The influx of Western values and liberal ideas get reflected when Fonchito defends Ismael’s marriage to a lower class *chola*. His socialization provided by a secular institution ensures that he would fit into the fast transforming Peruvian society, breaking away from traditional values and norms.

In *CC*, the family becomes a venue for garnering support for Odria and to suppress dissent. When Popeye opposed Odria, his father, who is a senator in Odria’s government says: ““Don’t forget that I’m an Odriist senator; so stop half-breeding Odria, silly”” (Llosa 23). The seemingly light reprimand carries within it the strong message that his son must not speak against the state. The family takes upon itself the function of policing individuals so that they do not act in non-normative ways contrary to the interests of the state. In turn, the state assists the family by protecting its members and by providing them with social capital in the form of powerful contacts. This becomes the most evident in *CC*. Santiago is released from jail by Cayo Bermudez because of Fermin’s pro-state stance.

The family, as the central target of biopower and functioning as a panopticon, regulates the sexuality of its members so that normative subjects conforming to state ideology are produced. In *CC*, as soon as Senora Zoila realizes the ‘corrupting’ influence Amalia might have on her sons, she dismisses the Black maid. The social taboo on inter-racial relationships propelled her to ‘cleanse’ her family for the sake of the ‘proper’

socialization of her sons. Miguel, Miki and Escobita in *TDH* are reprimanded for engaging in illicit affairs. The family censures their private life by controlling their sexuality.

The state assists the head of the family in controlling non-normative subjects, by what Jacques Donzelot calls “policing the family” (Donzelot 15). The setting of an age of majority by the state is indicative of this. The youths remain within the control of the family as per the dictates of the state. This is why Santiago’s father in *CC* repeatedly says that his will have to “study and only study; obey, only obey” (*CC*, Llosa 185) till they reach the age of majority.

## **The Production and Reproduction of Inequality in the Quasi-Private**

The family by serving as the point of convergence for the civil society and the state, functions as a socio-economic and political unit, reflecting the prevalent tendencies in the social order. The cooperative arrangements within the family which carry within them the potential for conflicts are replicated in the public sphere. In Llosa’s *CC*, we see several instances of what Beteille calls “the social reproduction of inequality” (435). In his essay “The Family and the Reproduction of Inequality” (1991), Beteille analyzes “how it come about that the same sorts of persons occupy the same sorts of positions from one generation to the next” (Beteille 435). He attributes the social inequality thus engendered to the family. The capital of the service class, including material assets, cultural capital in the form of “its command over knowledge, skills, tastes, etc” and social capital in the form of “networks of social relationships” (Beteille 439) are passed on from one generation to another, enabling their movement up the social ladder as in the case of the Zavalas. In *TDH*, the class structure of the society depicted is highly mobile. It is constantly in flux due to the rapid changes the nations

underwent during that period. The protagonists hail from newly rich families. This is the most explicit in the case of Felicito, the owner of the Narihuala Transport Company. Felicito becomes wealthy by his own efforts and he tries to secure his sons' future by giving them the best of education and training. It is his wealth and status as a respectable subject that enables him to do this.

Marriage becomes another way of reproducing inequality. The marriage between Popeye and Tete in *CC* is acceptable since they belong to the same social class. The marriage would automatically lead to an increase in the material assets of the family. However, Santiago's marriage to Ana in *CC* is seen as an attempt on the part of the latter to move up the ladder. Similarly, Miki and Escobita believe that Armida, their lower caste domestic servant, tricked Ismael into marrying her in order to inherit his wealth. They are unwilling to let a *chola* partake of their wealth. The prospect of moving up the social ladder makes Armida marry Ismael. She later inherits all his wealth and also establishes friendship with many powerful businessmen and politicians- another instance of marriage becoming a way of building one's social, cultural and material capital.

In *CC*, we witness what Amartya Sen terms "cooperative conflict" wherein "there are many co-operative outcomes - beneficial to all the parties compared with non co-operation - but the different parties have strictly conflicting interests" (456). The solution reached and the consequent benefits distributed will be in accordance with the respective powers of the members of the family. In *CC*, the family members, including Tete, cooperate with each other in the potentially conflict-ridden division of property. However, the decisions taken favor the already well-off male subject - Sparky. This further solidifies the inequality within the domestic sphere.

## Conclusion

The family, as represented in the works of Llosa are thus sites where multiple forces are at play. It functions as an in-between space where the subject can negotiate with the public and the state within the 'safety' of the autonomous domestic sphere. The currents that shape the socio-political scenario make their presence felt in the domestic, leading to the rupture and reconstruction of the domestic fabric, as the works demonstrate. The family in Latin America is a powerful site of enunciation from where the individual negotiates with the politico-jural domain and the state, establishing himself/herself as an autonomous subject.

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